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Cycles of Nature

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Artist Statement

My work focuses on my physical connection to the earth. I translate what I see and visualize in nature into graphic shapes and patterns using textiles, fibers, and paints. Further, I interweave these materials through a variety of techniques, and I incorporate sewn lines to create compositions highlighting natural elements that depict the course of life.

I employ a hands-on, low technology approach. This tactic contrasts my work as a professional graphic designer. While my professional efforts generally lack a physical connection with nature, due to digital simulations of real objects, my personal artwork allows me to step away from the insipid technology tools commonly used in today's society.

Cycles of Nature

Enrolling in the Graduate Program

After receiving my undergraduate degree, I became eager to take a break from the classroom and seek my first job. I began my career as a graphic designer for the US Government and spent three years mastering electronic media and visually solving complicated analytic problems. I was quickly indoctrinated into the workplace culture, and my first organization regularly conducted work assessment meetings referred to as *critiques*. However, these assessments were significantly dissimilar to art school review processes. For example, the critiques were rarely critical and therefore, the process lacked the impetus to force personal challenges and the need to push the limits of creativity. As a result, I realized I was becoming complacent when I began to resist the corporate design standards. I chose to moderately and tastefully employ personal styles and traditional techniques into my work efforts. For instance, I incorporated painting, torn paper, and fabrics into my print designs (elements not often seen in government products). I chose to add a hands-on, tactile feel to my work, while searching for a solution to satisfy a creative void.

This new style of working offered variety but tended not to remain challenging. Therefore, I concluded that a return to graduate level education would offer me the opportunity to explore creativity and enhance my focus. I also deduced that advanced education would allow me to remain physically connected to my art disciplines and would push me outside of my comfort zone. After a search, I chose the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts (MIS-IAR) program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) and enrolled in my first class—painting.

After significant time spent studying and practicing graphic design, I expected graduate level artistic classes to consist of solving a predefined problem directed by the class instructor. However, I discovered that my challenge was to formulate my own problem and develop a personal style, aesthetic, and artistic voice. Initially, I experienced difficulties determining topics, styles, and materials. However, I chose to contrast my digital aesthetic in my professional environment and approach every assignment in the degree program using little or no technology. I distanced myself from my job-related expertise and focused on exploring materials and processes of fine art that were foreign and personal to me. This new approach was a challenge but it enabled me to step away from current, popular, and impersonal technology tools.

Aesthetic

My professional aesthetic has embraced bold and colorful typography and imagery. When developing a composition, I often digitally layer torn papers, fabrics, and paintings. These techniques usually include rich, high contrast color, bright graphic patterns, and textures. I have developed an insight into aesthetically pleasing corporate print design.

However, as I began pursuing this graduate degree, I attempted to abandon my established aesthetics and explore new, different approaches. For each project, I initially selected bold paints or graphic fabrics, and created compositions with high contrast elements. Over time, however, I used class assignments to embrace my learned and developed skills and integrated new techniques and ideas. I rarely use technology in my personal artwork but I learned to incorporate my color palette, love of textures and patterns, and knowledge of composition.

Further, as my work matured, I developed a distinct focus. I drew inspiration from nature

and from my experiences in outdoor settings. My work evolved from my love of the earth. I used various media to describe the cycles of life as nature transitions from one stage to the next. I remain amazed by nature's continual evolution and natural recycling processes. As I expressed what I witnessed in graphic depictions and abstract collages, I better understood how nature affects and motivates me as an artist.

Process

To gain the highest benefit from this degree, I determined I needed to concentrate more on the act of making art rather than the end result. While incorporating my established aesthetic with new media and ideas, I continually focused on materials and processes. I sought to experience a physical interaction with materials and preferred to create with my hands to symbolize and solidify my attachment to nature. For example, I am fascinated by evolution and regeneration in the process by which plants change as they grow. I feel connected to their lifecycle and adopt their changing organic shapes as inspiration for my work. Further, most of my efforts attempt to manually manipulate tactile materials and many processes document stages of growth.

Through multiple experiments, I found connections in materials used and began combining techniques and processes. Additionally, as I focused on quilting, bookmaking, and painting I discovered that each focus was interwoven into the other. As I experimented and introduced paper into my quilts, stitching into my books, and fibers into my paintings, I realized that my work and approaches became richer and more complex.

Paintings

I began the MIS-IAR program by learning how to paint more passionately. In the early stages of this degree, I did not have an aesthetic or theme for my work and therefore, I chose to paint portraits. I prepared for my first acrylic painting, *Self Portrait* (Appendix, 1), by digitally manipulating an image of my dog and me using a computer software tool. I removed the color from the image and increased the contrast to transform the shadows and highlights of our faces and bodies into shapes. I exaggerated the elements of the photo which allowed my hand and eye to translate the image into a painting. For this painting, I used a sepia-toned color palette so that I could learn how to manipulate paint without the complexity of having to mix colors. This treatment is a method of altering a black and white image so that it is composed of many shades of brown. This technique taught me how to paint bright white highlights, dark brown shadows, and all intermediate tones.

While focusing on media rather than subject matter, I painted several more acrylic and oil portraits using very smooth brush strokes and flat areas of paint. I used photo manipulation techniques at the beginning of each piece and continued to incorporate color into my work. In my first acrylic color painting, *Dog Happy* (Appendix, 2), I painted my dog using a black and white photo. In this effort, I translated the black and white shadows and highlights into color by increasing the contrast and saturation using a computer software tool, which was employed minimally to integrate all of my learned skills.

As my paintings matured, I controlled my brush strokes to a lesser degree. I further expanded my use of color and brush technique as I experimented with oil paints in *Underwater* (Appendix, 3). I quickly learned that my oil paintings looked very different compared to my acrylics because I gained more time to manipulate the colors and my brush strokes through

differences in paint type. I enjoyed and adopted this approach because my gestural brush strokes suggested illusionistic depth and dimension.

Painting courses offered me a foundation for creating compositions and using color. I later incorporated techniques mastered in painting into my fiber work and quilts.

Quilts

I made my first quilt before the age of ten. Therefore, when I enrolled in my first graduate quilting course I considered myself to be a *traditional quilter*. As I had only used purchased patterns to make blankets, I became enthused to learn that a quilt could be an art element, not just something to keep me warm. Fortunately, I knew the principles of quilt design and did not struggle with fabric cutting, sewing straight seams, or mitering corners.

One of the first art quilts I completed was an appliqué experiment entitled *Pop Flower Blocks* (Appendix, 4). The challenge was to create a mini-quilt with four quadrants. Each quadrant was required to contain the same shape but be attached using a different appliqué technique. I created a shape which represented an abstract flower for the center of each square and appliquéd it to a collage of bold commercial and hand-dyed fabrics. In this small sampler, I experimented with fabric piecing, machine quilting, hand appliqué, and satin stitching. This effort taught me that I can design creatively with fabric and also allowed me to learn and apply many different techniques of appliqué. After completing this piece, I realized that I had total control over the design and development process, and I dismissed the need to purchase future quilt patterns.

As my work progressed, I migrated from making quilts that resembled blankets and experimented with stretched compositions using commercial fabric, batting, and stitching. I

created a triptych called *Snapdragons and Bowl* (Appendix, 5) with three related panels, each using a color palette of black, rich blues, reds, and shades of white. Its imagery consisted of a graphic representation of snapdragons, a still life depiction of a bowl, and an image of a flower. I began the development process by piecing the background fabric, and I subsequently cut each of the shapes to be appliquéd and arranged them on the panels. Finally, I ironed the shapes to the background, arranged the top layer, batting, and backing, and began to free-motion quilt. (Free-motion quilting is a machine quilting technique where one has complete freedom to sew in any direction. I used it mostly for my curved and intricate designs. The machine's feed dogs, which "feed" the fabric through the machine automatically, were dropped or disengaged, and I controlled moving the fabric, the stitch length, and tension.) I carefully traced around each of the shapes using the needle of my sewing machine and covered the background with small and complicated stitching designs. I chose to use thread that matched the background fabrics. This allowed room for stitch variation since the threads became more of a texture than a design element. Finally, I attached the three panels using a binding technique and meticulously hand-embroidered designs onto each panel. I finished this piece by attaching the fabric to stretcher bars as if it were a painting.

During my initial efforts, I used commercial fibers but experienced difficulties locating appropriate colors or patterns that matched my aesthetic. To solve this dilemma, I developed a labor and time-intensive process of hand-dying fabric. While I began the Surface Design courses with a specific agenda and expectation, I discovered that I had developed a new appreciation for techniques rather than results. For example, I appreciated my carefully designed fabrics and rags equally. I discovered that dyes, textures, and uses of materials affected color combinations and resulting visual appeal. For example, the fabric used in *Cone Flower* (Appendix, 6) was a last

minute experiment. Because I did not have enough dye to cover the whole piece, I drenched it in *chemical water* (a thinning agent used in the direct application dyeing method). This technique allowed the colors of the dye to blend and created a soft painterly feeling piece of fabric. However, as this was initially a rag, it lent itself to varied cutting and experimentation. I eventually created this quilt by using a technique called *reverse appliqué* where I cut an abstract representation of the center of a cone flower from the top fabric and attached a piece of neon yellow hand-dyed fabric behind to cover the cut holes. Then, I layered the top fabric, batting, and backing and connected the fabric with a detailed free-motion and hand-stitching.

Falling (Appendix, 7) was created using hand-dyed, patterned commercial, and batik fabrics. I started this project by piecing the background fabrics to create square and rectangular fields of colors. I subsequently fused the carefully cut leaf shapes inside of the patchwork fabric background. Thereafter, I used free-motion stitching and traced around the shapes with my sewing machine needle adding veins and detail on some of the leaves. I also designed different patterns using free-motion quilting on each fabric section of the background. I added further detail by sewing around some of the shapes hundreds of times to build up the threads and color. This thread building technique allowed me to create more complex drawings, using fiber and thread that resembled paintings.

As I continued to perfect my free-motion stitching skills, I realized that the options were endless for what could be accomplished on a sewing machine. Using the skills derived from painting classes, I created portraits using a technique identified as *thread painting*. To create these images, such as in *Blue* (Appendix, 8), I used free-motion quilting to stitch over an area until I built up colors, shadows, and highlights. This process used approximately five to six different shades of thread color which blended together and created illusionistic depth and detail.

I continued to make quilts and seek new techniques. As I progressed, I became confident in processes and materials and applied free-form techniques. I also continued to discover new media and integrated it into the art of bookmaking. I occasionally incorporated many of my quilting processes into book design, and I prefer binding techniques that rely heavily on stitching methods gained from previous studies and efforts.

Books

Upon making my first book, I had obtained a large collection of hand-dyed fabrics and gained experience in quilting techniques. I embraced quilting and pursued translating many of the processes into bookmaking. I used my hand-dyed fibers, commercial fabrics, paper, and stitching to experiment with different types of book design.

During my first bookmaking effort, I created a new book titled *A* (Appendix, 9) using only an old encyclopedia and an X-acto knife. I ripped out every page from the binding and cut the images from the pages and folded the papers in half. These folded pages, which were collected together, are known as *signatures*. I then connected the signatures using a process that sandwiched them into triangular folds (Appendix, 9a). Even though I was limited to the recycled book as a medium, I was able to create juxtapositions of a wide range of images all based on the letter A.

As I continued to craft books I experimented with folding and stitching. I also experimented with techniques to connect pages so that they would relate to each other. I created *Lines* (Appendix, 10) by folding a long piece of paper back and forth to create accordion-style folds. Then, I folded pieces of paper in half to create signatures, drew pen and ink illustrations on all of the pages, and sewed each signature into the front and the back of the accordion folded

paper. I used fabric to cover the front and back boards to protect and contain my signatures. When closed this appears to be a normal book but when open (Appendix, 10a) the pages can be unfolded and moved.

During my bookmaking education, I learned many binding stitches including a favorite, the *Coptic stitch*. This is an open-spine binding where the pages and covers are held together by a series of interlocking stitches which resemble the chain stitch used in embroidery. Coptic is a challenging but beautiful binding technique that takes significant practice to align the stitches uniformly and consistently. When I began practicing this stitch, I underestimated the delicacy of the media and, I tore many of the signatures. However, I perfected this stitch and bound many books using card stock with covers out of my favorite fabrics. After I became confident in my abilities, I decided to rummage through my paper collection and create a book from paper samples. To create *Type and Image* (Appendix, 11), I disassembled a typeface sample book which advertised new typeface designs by setting them in quirky quotes that started with “A Little Bit of . . .” and ended with sayings that matched the type designs. I then collaged these with images from stock photography postcards (Appendix, 11a). I challenged myself to marry the two elements on each page of the book. As an alternative to gluing, I attached the collaged items by sewing them onto the pages with a sewing machine. Then, I sewed all the signatures together using the Coptic stitch. When bound, the random sayings and pictures oddly made sense.

As in all of my educationally-related projects, each book I created was an experiment. I challenged myself to learn different binding techniques and incorporate many different materials while maintaining my nature theme. I selected recycled materials such as old books, leather, wood, fabric, and various papers to create new pieces. I incorporated painting, quilting,

appliqué, stitching, and drawing on the pages and the covers. I created mini-quilts for the covers of several of my books using a felt-like product instead of batting. This allowed me to create a sturdy flat surface made of fabric that I could stitch to the pages. I also learned different folding techniques and practiced many types of stitches using embroidery floss (which created the same look as the hand-stitching on my quilted pieces) to bind. The therapeutic process of cutting and gluing pages for making books, and the many repetitious folding and sewing actions are challenging and rewarding. Book design may be considered one medium that connects all of the techniques and disciplines I encountered in the MIS-IAR program.

Conclusion

When I entered the MIS-IAR program, I intended to pursue instruction and processes in the development of fine art that were unfamiliar and challenging. Further, I sought to regain physical contact with my art, which I considered excluded from my daily habits and routine. I also envisioned that completion of the degree program would allow me to develop, enhance, and maintain a well-rounded portfolio of many types of skills. Therefore, during the course of the program I challenged myself to learn many new and different approaches. Further, as my aesthetic developed I integrated painting, bookbinding, quilting, surface design, printmaking, and graphic design—which allowed me to grow significantly as an artist. The MIS-IAR program at Virginia Commonwealth University has enabled me to continue to develop my creative and artistic skills and enhance my future ability to contribute successfully in a variety of personal and professional settings.

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Figure 1. *Self Portrait*, acrylic on canvas, 36"x24", 2008.

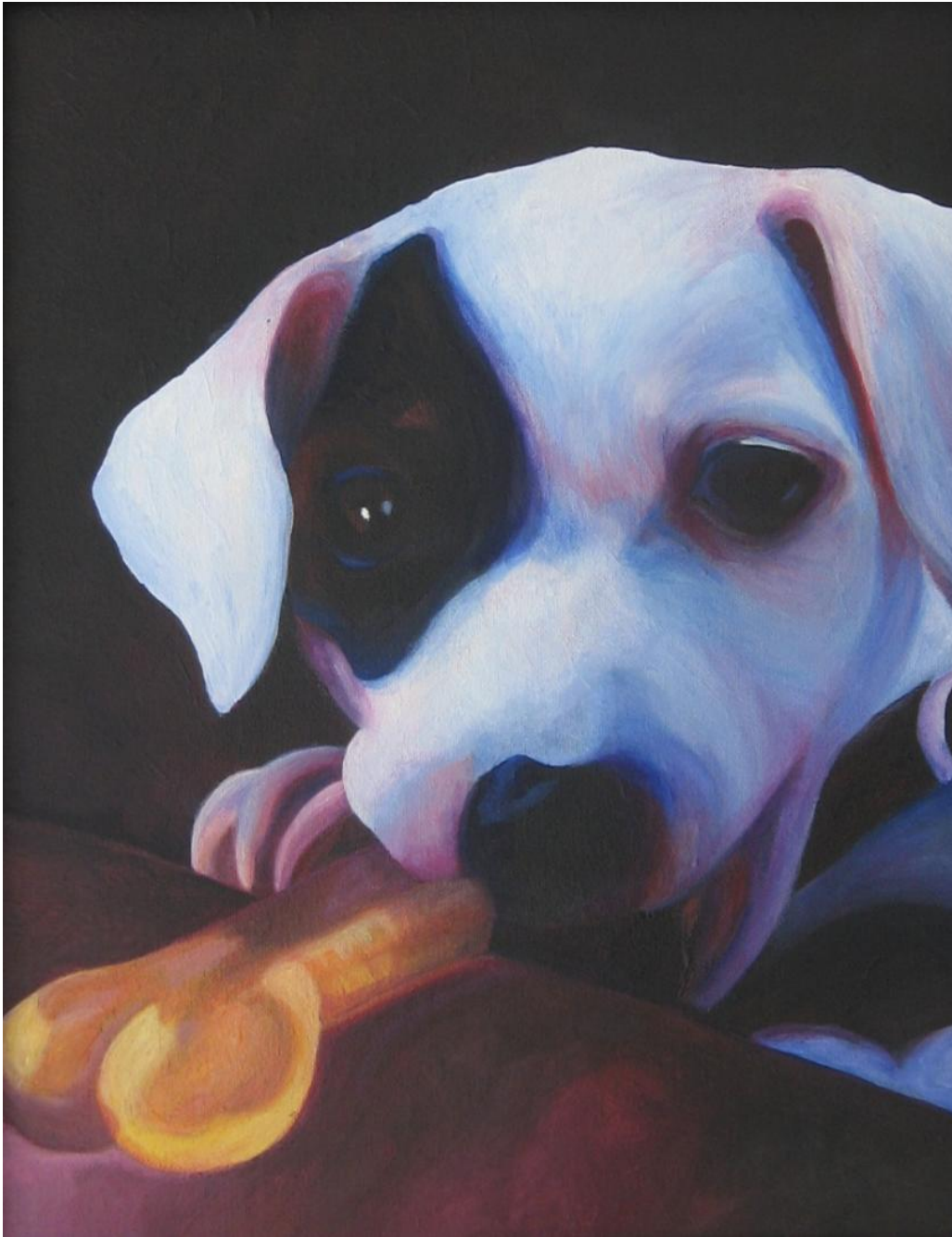


Figure 2. *Dog Happy*, acrylic on canvas, 10"x8", 2008.



Figure 3. *Underwater*, oil on canvas, 36" x24", 2009.



Figure 4. *Pop Flower Blocks*, cotton fiber with cotton thread, 18"x18", 2009.



Figure 5. *Snapdragons and Bowl*, cotton fiber with cotton thread, 24"x30", 2010.



Figure 6. *Cone Flower*, hand-dyed cotton fiber with cotton thread, 30"x16", 2011.



Figure 7. *Falling*, hand-dyed and commercial cotton fiber with cotton thread, 40"x24", 2011.



Figure 8. *Blue*, polyester thread on cotton fiber, 6"x6", 2011.

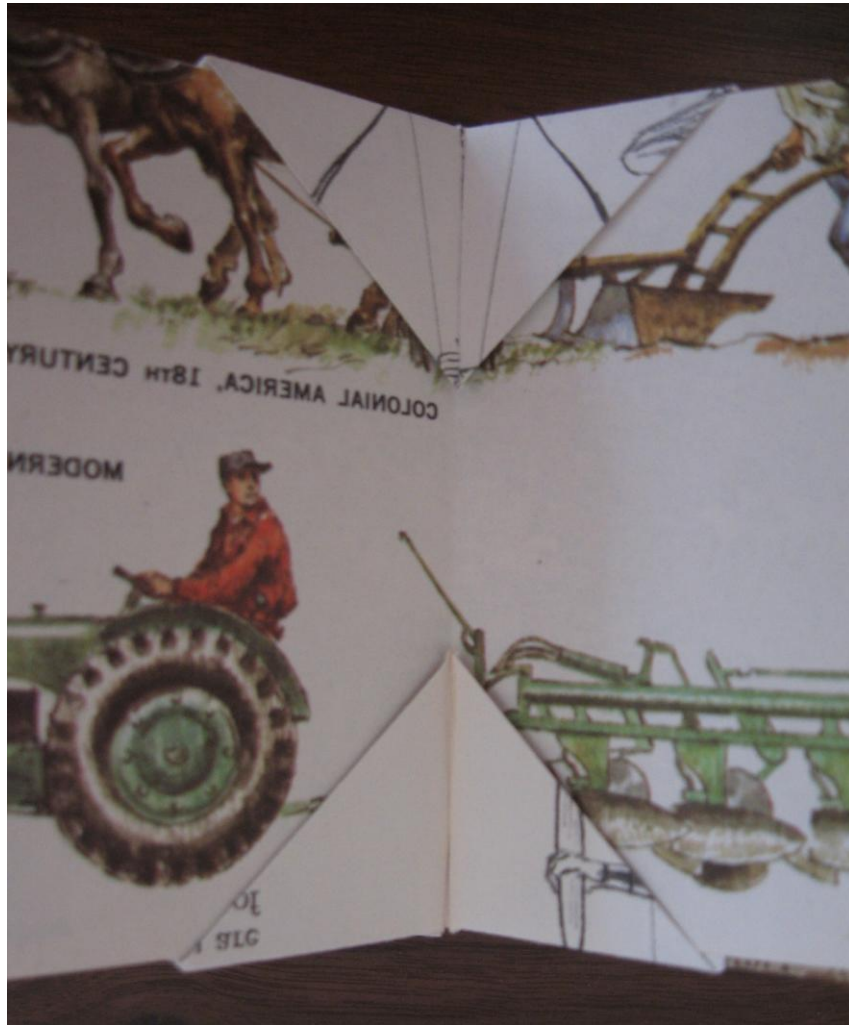


Figure 9a. A (detail), recycled encyclopedia, 6"x7"x1", 2010.



Figure 10. *Lines*, paper and cotton fiber, 4"x6"x.5", 2010.



Figure 10a. *Lines* (detail), paper and cotton fiber, 4"x6"x.5", 2010.



Figure 11. *Type and Image*, recycled paper samples, 5.5"x11"x2", (closed) 2010.



Figure 11a. *Type and Image*, (detail), recycled paper samples, 5.5"x11"x2", 2010.

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Education

- 2011 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA. Emphasis in Crafts and Mixed Media
- 2005 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA. Emphasis in Communication Arts and Design
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Work Experience

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- 2005 Graphic Designer, Anderson Gallery
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- 1999-2005 Graphic Artist and Designer, Ukrop's Supermarkets
Richmond, VA
- 2002 Production Assistant, Daniel Butler Photography
Midlothian, VA
- 2001 Visual Assistant, Petals and Bows Florist
Chesterfield, VA

Awards and Honors

- 2008 First Place in Print Graphics, Intelligence Community Media Excellence Awards, JD Hill Auditorium, Washington, DC
- 2009 Government Merit in Print Design. "In-Howse Design Annual." *HOW Magazine*: (February 2009), 77.

Exhibitions

- 2011 *Cycles of Nature*, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Arts Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University at Northern Virginia Annandale Verizon Gallery, Annandale, VA